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Politics of the Arab World

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What do Donald Trump and John Quincy Adams have in Common?: Islamophobia

Many Americans were shocked and horrified when GOP presidential candidate Donald Trump suggested a ban on Muslims entering the United States, but this xenophobic stance towards Islam has been quite common throughout American history. Donald Trump and his supporters are buying into an old fearful sentiment of the Middle East that has been increasingly reinvigorated since the attacks on 9/11. These fears rest in a dialogue about Islam that has been repeated over and over by Westerners, which has in turn distorted our image of Muslims and their way of life.

Our wariness towards the Middle East comes from what scholar Edward Said has labeled “orientalism,” which he argues is the tendency of the Western world to paint the Middle East as the polar opposite of “civilization” (Milton-Edwards 10). Americans of the past and present inherited this tradition of orientalism from Europe and still continue to distance themselves from Muslims. Donald Trump and others frequently fall into the trap of orientalist language, which leads them to talk in terms of “us” versus “them.” In a recent interview with CNN, Anderson Cooper asked Trump if Islam is “at war with the West” and he responded, “I think Islam hates us” (Sherfinski). When asked further about this response, Trump implied that there is something inherently hateful about Islam. By saying “they” hate “us,” referring to the United States and other Western nations, he is implying that the whole religion of Islam despises the West. These comments directly draw upon the orientalist concept of a “clash of civilizations,” which holds that the “West” and “East” are inherently enemies and at odds with one another (Lyons 117). This theory has become increasingly supported in the last 2 decades and is a major piece of evidence for those who support caution towards the Islamic world.

While the idea of a “clash of civilizations” has certainly become a recent obsession among the American Right, it has much older origins in the United States. In the 1820s, there was a massive wave of public support for American intervention in the Greek War of Independence, within which Orthodox Christian Greece was fighting for independence from the largely Muslim Ottoman Empire. According to historian Karine Walther, one of the leaders of the “Philhellenes,” the American movement supporting Greece, claimed that this was a, “war of the crescent against the cross.” (Walther 33). Many Americans understood it as their Christian duty to help Greece struggle against what they viewed as an oppressive Islamic regime. The president at the time, James Monroe, was sympathetic to the cause, noting that Greek Christians had been controlled by a Muslim “despotism,” but his then secretary of state, John Quincy Adams, warned him against intervening in foreign affairs.

However, a decade later, after he himself had served as president, Quincy Adams revealed his own anti-Muslim sentiments. In reference to the prophet Muhammed, Quincy Adams wrote that, “the essence of his doctrine was violence and lust: to exalt the brutal over the spiritual part of human nature” (Walther 52). Using colorful and passionate language, President Quincy Adams claims that Islam itself is “brutish” and “violent,” essentially condemning it as the opposite of Western Christian civilization. Quincy Adams’s rhetoric here is about as orientalist and Islamophobic as it gets, which reveals that even some of our early presidents were vehemently opposed to Islam and believed it was the enemy of the West.

Fast forward back to 2016 and we see that Donald Trump’s claim that “Islam hates us” is not at all out of line with some Americans who sought the highest office in the land long ago. What is alarming about this repeated rhetoric is that it comes from an orientalist misunderstanding which seems to have hardly been altered over the last 200 years. Donald Trump is not getting his understanding of the Muslim world from his knowledge of ISIS or any other radical extremist group, rather he is drawing upon a long tradition of unfounded xenophobia towards followers of Islam. The truth is that Islam does not hate us. There are certainly radical organizations who oppose the United States that happen to be Muslim, but they do not hate us because of their religion. It is important for Americans to understand that our current fear of Islam comes from a long line of hate based on false principles. We must educate our fellow citizens on where our hate comes from so we can start to reverse it for the better.

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